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VI. — *Plot and Character in Greek Tragedy*

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THE question of the relative importance of plot and character-portrayal in tragedy has exercised critics from Aristotle's day to our own, nor is there even now complete agreement. To some, it is true, Aristotle has seemed the ultimate and final authority, an unerring guide whom even to-day we may safely follow, and whose utterances may claim from us unhesitating acceptance; others, on the contrary, hold that his analysis of the art of poetry is, to be sure, suggestive, and many of his observations keen and penetrating, but at the same time they hold that his view of tragedy was strangely formal and limited, and that he erred in applying the processes of a purely logical analysis to that which, as an aesthetic manifestation, lies quite outside of the domain in which these processes are valid and productive of results. They hold furthermore that the great master's deductions, based as they were upon tragedies of the antique type, break down in the face of the wider and richer Shakespearian type. In particular the act of dramatic characterization is advanced as a matter regarding which Aristotle can teach us little or nothing, not merely because in modern tragedy the characters are far more elaborately portrayed, but because, as some would have us believe, there neither was nor could be on the ancient stage any real characterization at all.

Now we need not share Lessing's opinion of Aristotle's infallibility, nor should we content ourselves with a study of merely theoretical criticism, ancient or modern. The true method of approach in the investigation of the subject before us is a frank and unbiased study of the plays themselves, undertaken with a view to ascertaining precisely what the facts are. This has been the method pursued in the present study. I touch upon theories of dramatic art and the differences between Greek and modern, or, let me say, Shakespearian tragedy merely to clear the ground, as it were. It

is a wholly mistaken method to seek to establish conclusions in advance, and then in the study of the characters to look for illustrations of the principles involved in these conclusions.

Into the controversy which has raged about the interpretation of Aristotle's famous utterances in the sixth chapter of the *Poetics*,

"Without action there cannot be a tragedy; without characters there can;" and

"The plot, then, is the first principle, and, as it were, the soul of a tragedy; the characters are secondary,"

it is needless for us now to enter. We shall find it well, however, to emphasize certain plain facts:

1) Aristotle cannot have meant that the highest interest in tragedy centers about an intricate plot. One cannot read the Greek tragedies upon which his judgments were based without being struck by the fact that the plot is, as a rule, almost negligible as an element of tragic interest. (This is well emphasized in Newman's essay on *Poetry, with Reference to Aristotle's Poetics*.) In this connection it is interesting to note that to French critics, accustomed to the strict logical development of the action in French tragedy, many scenes in the Greek tragedians have seemed quite pointless. It is in commenting on such criticisms of Voltaire and La Harpe that Faguet, in his book, *Drame ancien, drame moderne*, uses these words: "'Peinture de caractère,' dit Patin. Il a raison. Mais cela prouve que les Grecs attachent beaucoup plus d'importance à la peinture complète du caractère qu'à la continuité de l'action."

2) It is equally certain that, taken as a statement of aesthetic values, Aristotle's words are not likely to be accepted by students of today as final and authoritative. For, just as it is true that plot is but a slight element in the aesthetic effect of a Greek play, so it is also true that, if one passes in review the works of tragic writers, ancient or modern, the element that remains most firmly fixed in the mind is the characters. Clytemnestra, Antigone, Oedipus, Medea, Lady Macbeth, Lear, Cordelia, Hamlet—these figures

live on in our minds with a vitality that is imperishable. They would live on were we to forget the details of the plays in question.

3) We must, however, note what is often overlooked, that even after these admissions have been made, Aristotle's words contain a statement of a fundamental fact. There can be no portrayal of character that is in any real sense dramatic without at least a skeleton outline of plot. The matter is pointedly put by Walkley in his book on *Dramatic Criticism*. "I venture," he says, "to submit to you a very different interpretation of this passage, a sense in which Aristotle's words are absolutely valid for all drama in all time. It is that Aristotle here was not attempting an artistic appreciation at all, but making a scientific classification. He was marking off the special province of drama in the general region of art. The *differentia* of drama, what makes it itself and not something else, he shows, is action." Again: "Characters are isolated forces, forces *in vacuo*. To make drama these forces must come into collision." "Even to-day," he says later on, with reference to Maeterlinck, "the drama of motionless life has beguiled some men to heresy."

In approaching the subject of characterization in Greek tragedy, it is necessary to take time for certain preliminary statements, in order to mark out the lines upon which such a study should be conducted. One must, in doing this, travel a well-trodden road, but though the facts may be familiar and the statements trite, yet upon these facts most unwarrantable conclusions have been based, and a consideration of them may not be omitted.

Certain elements, then, entailed by the conditions under which a Greek tragedy was presented, necessarily limited the freedom of the artist in the portrayal of character. The large, open-air theatre, the normally unchanged scene, the publicity of the action made necessary by the use of a chorus, the few characters, allowing but little interplay, the conventional tragic costume, designed, if we can trust our tradition, to increase the stature and size of the actor, the mask — though here, too, I must add, "if we can trust our tradition"

— the mask, which would necessarily stand in the way of anything like individuality in character-drawing — all these things made both for stateliness and for simplicity. They were one and all conventional limitations with which the creative artist had to reckon. But it is in the face of limitations that art achieves its greatest triumphs; and we should remember also that an art-form marked by the most rigid conventions may be the mould in which is cast a creation of entire sincerity and naturalness.

If we ask ourselves what sort of drama is to be looked for under these conditions, we shall certainly answer that it would be marked by a broad simplicity both as regards plot and characters, and that it would inevitably possess a certain formal statuesqueness. “A la puissance de la poésie,” writes Patin (*Études sur les tragiques grecs*, I, 13 ff.), “vint s’unir celle de tous les autres arts : l’architecture construisit ces immenses édifices où se pressait une innombrable multitude ; la statuaire et la peinture décorèrent la scène tragique ; la musique régla les mouvements cadencés, les évolutions régulières du chœur, et prêta son harmonie à la mélodie des vers. . . . Sans doute ces personnages héroïques qui se montraient sur la scène n’offraient point un contraste trop choquant avec les belles représentations de la nature que produisait dans le même temps le ciseau des artistes. . . . Si on lit avec attention les ouvrages des tragiques grecs, on ne pourra manquer de s’apercevoir que tout y était calculé pour le plaisir des yeux : chaque scène était un groupe, un tableau, qui, en attachant les regards, s’expliquait presque de lui-même à l’esprit, sans le secours des paroles.”

Apart from the purely external conventions already mentioned, we must take account of two others, which have an important bearing on the matter before us. The Greek tragedian almost invariably took his subjects from the mythical past. We say “almost invariably,” for the few exceptions of which we have knowledge serve only to prove the rule. Now the import of this fact had been strangely misinterpreted. To DeQuincey, obsessed as he was with the idea that there *must* be neither action nor character-drawing

in a Greek tragedy, it meant that the poet chose such themes, and made the figures of heroic legend the characters of his play, for the very reason that only by so doing could he get away from the necessity of portraying characters which would require individualization. Surely it would seem more natural to assume that in thus turning to earlier and less conventional ages for his themes and characters, the tragic artist was guided rather by the fact that in such ages the elemental passions are more freely and frankly expressed, and the tragic consequences arising therefrom more strikingly shown. In this the spirit of Greek tragedy is germane to that of Shakespeare. A Lady Macbeth, a Richard III, a Cleopatra was quite as alien to the London of Shakespeare as an Electra, a Clytemnestra, a Medea was to the Athens of Aeschylus or Euripides.

This point should be borne in mind, but at the same time it is plain that this fixed convention of choosing characters and themes from the field of heroic legend imposed very real limitations on the Greek tragic artist alike in the matter of plot and in the matter of character-portrayal. The field was limited, and the range within which the characters asserted themselves was also limited by the traditional story, and limited in a way which tended to make unnecessary, or even to a certain extent to preclude the portrayal of individual traits. The characters were, so to speak, consecrated by tradition, and only in minor points was the poet at liberty to alter them or to alter the legend upon which his plot was based. How it was that, in the face of these limitations, the artist succeeded in making his characters "real," and in imbuing them with life, forms a most interesting study.

Again, we must remember how short a Greek play ordinarily was, and how restricted its scope. The longest plays we have scarcely exceed 1700 lines in length (1400 to 1500 would be a fair average), and from these the choral odes must be deducted. In the *Agamemnon*, to take an extreme case, these amount to upwards of 500 lines. Patently then, having, let us say, some 1100 or 1200 lines at his disposal (considerably less, that is, than the first two acts of *Hamlet*) for

the exposition, the development of the action, and the portrayal of the characters, the artist was greatly restricted in his freedom; and we see at once that there were certain things which he simply could not attempt to include in his treatment. The importance of this fact is manifest; and the resulting difference between Greek and Shakespearian tragedy is well put by Brander Matthews (*Development of the Drama*, 214) in these words: "Shakespeare achieved almost his highest triumph in the revelation of character as it slowly disintegrated under stress of repeated temptation. We can behold the virus of ambition working in Macbeth, and we are made witnesses of the persistent solicitations of his wife. We are shown how the poison of jealousy slowly destroyed the nobility of Othello's nature. The conditions of the Greek stage made it impossible for Sophocles to attempt this."

Now while this brevity of the play did not preclude the successful portrayal of character or the adequate representation of an action, it did unquestionably lead to one of the features most characteristic of a Greek tragedy, its intense concentration. In the greatest tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides — those, I mean, which stand out in conspicuous grandeur, as *Othello*, *Lear*, *Macbeth*, and *Hamlet* do among the tragedies of Shakespeare — we have a single action which moves to its inevitable end, often with amazing swiftness — an action comparable in the minds of French critics to the fifth act merely of a French tragedy. The characters involved in the story are, as a rule, from the very opening of the play conceived as being under the sway of one dominant emotion, which illustrates some chief characteristic of their natures, and leads them to a course of action governed by one fixed resolve — a resolve carried out unflinching and unwaveringly. The concentration is indeed intense; but who that knows Clytemnestra, Antigone, Medea, Iphigenia, fails to see that they are none the less drawn from life? The soul is not laid bare to our view in its entirety, not all sides of the character are portrayed; in general there is no wavering between resolve and inaction; searching psy-

chological analysis we do not have; multitudinous scenes having for their dramatic end the illustration of some particular phase of character—for these there is, as a rule, no place; but within the limits set for him by the conventions of his art the Greek poet in a very true sense held the mirror up to nature.

After this survey of some of the limiting conventions with which the Greek tragic artist was confronted—a survey meant to be suggestive only, not exhaustive—we are in a position to consider certain general views which have been held by writers on the art of tragedy with reference to characterization on the Greek stage. In all of these views there is naturally somewhat of truth; they all, however, break down for the simple reason that the subject is too complex to admit of such simple formulations.

We turn first to the view, so often met, that, properly speaking, the characters of Greek tragedy are not individuals at all, that they are not animated by personal motives, but that the real agents are the great, elemental moral forces which animate them; that the characters have, in short, at most a typical value—that they are not living, breathing human beings. In illustration of this view I quote from Paul Stapfer, whose book, *Shakespeare et les tragiques grecs*, is in the main a thoroughly sympathetic interpretation of Greek tragic art. He puts the matter thus: “Un trait distingue par excellence la tragédie de Sophocle comme aussi celle d’Eschyle: c’est la sévère beauté plastique des personnages et la valeur hautement générale des motifs qui les font agir. L’intérêt de la représentation s’attache moins aux personnalités qui sont en scène qu’aux saintes et augustes puissances du monde moral dont ces personnalités sont la vivante incarnation. L’État, la famille, et surtout la religion, voilà les grands acteurs du drame antique; l’individu, comme tel, disparaît plus ou moins sous la majesté de son rôle.” Again, a little further on, he writes: “Telle est la tragédie classique; ses personnages sont solides, tout d’une pièce; une seule passion les remplit et les anime, et cette passion n’a rien de personnel, elle s’identifie toujours avec quelque devoir



ou quelque intérêt sacré" (pp. 6 and 7; cf. 77). Butcher, too (*Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art*, 351 f.), has an excellent paragraph on this subject.

The truth underlying this theory is patent, but the application of it to the interpretation of the characters of Greek tragedy has often led to conclusions the falsity of which is equally patent. Let us take the most extreme case offered by our extant plays, the treatment of the Orestes story by Aeschylus. In the second play of the trilogy we have the baldest possible treatment of the dramatic elements, coupled with one single scene of such tremendous power that we hardly know where to turn in order to find its equal. The plot is of the flimsiest character, the poet makes virtually no really dramatic use of the person of Electra, so fraught with dramatic possibilities; all the elements which would have tended to enhance the human interest of the play are not so much slighted as rigorously suppressed. On the other hand, the underlying moral problem, so deeply, so immeasurably significant, engrosses all our attention; and it was plainly the poet's purpose that it should do so. Here we have indeed an illustration of a unique form of tragedy; but to take the Aeschylean Orestes as an illustration of the type of characterization which prevailed on the Greek stage is most unwarrantable. On the contrary the Orestes of Aeschylus is emphatically a character of an isolated type, understandable only when one takes into consideration the peculiar genius of the poet, the special theme of which he was treating, and the massive complex of the trilogy. If it be objected that in Sophocles, too, Orestes is only slightly individualized, the answer is that in the Sophoclean play it is Electra, not Orestes, who is made the centre of interest. It is in the portrayal of *her* character that the poet enlists our deepest sympathy, and to this portrayal all else in the play is subordinated.

Another point should be emphasized. It is true that the Aeschylean, and to a certain extent the Sophoclean, characters are largely "solid" — *tout d'une pièce*. They move, as a rule, with unfaltering step to the inevitable end, whether that end be their own doom, or the performance of some

awful act demanded of them by the situation in which they are placed. But to say that this unchangeableness is a *law* of Greek characterization is absurd. To disprove this assertion it is necessary merely to note a few of the many instances in which the solidarity of the character is given up — sacrificed, if you will — to the higher law of naturalness. Antigone, strong and defiant before Creon, wholly sure of the justice of her cause, breaks down when the tension is relaxed, and when she is being led away to the terrible doom which is to be hers, doubts whether after all the gods themselves would say that she has acted aright. The iron has entered into her strong and beautiful soul. Creon, again, in the same play, so wholly sure that he is right and that everybody who opposes him is wrong, so sure, too, that he is acting in the interest of Thebes, loses all this confidence when arraigned by the seer, Tiresias, and with a complete reversal of attitude seeks to undo all that he has done. Iphigenia, who so pathetically pleads with her unnatural father to spare her, is later on animated by a heroic resolve to give her life to save Greece — a change of attitude which Aristotle so little understood that he cites her as an example of inconsistency. And what shall we say of the young Neoptolemus, whose nobility of soul makes him at the last, when their end has been attained, refuse to be a party to the deceit practised by Odysseus on the helpless Philoctetes, and thus brings about a crisis which calls for the only appearance in Sophocles' plays of a *deus ex machina*? Cases like these — and the list might be made much longer — surely outweigh the fact that Clytemnestra, the Lady Macbeth of Greek tragedy, has no "compunctious visitings." Even the Orestes of Aeschylus falters as sword in hand he drives his mother within to meet her doom — "un moment d'hésitation," remarks Stapfer, "court, mais très remarquable." It would have been far more remarkable, if Aeschylus, who so clearly stamps Orestes' deed, despite the fact that it was commanded by a god, as a hideous crime, had represented Orestes as feeling no compunctions. That human cry, "Pylades, what am I to do?" is more significant than the theories of all the critics.

Before leaving this phase of the subject, it will be well for us to note that the dramatic characters which affect us most powerfully — those of the master dramatist of all time included — owe their power in no small measure to the fact that, however individualized, they remain in the truest sense typical. Mere personal idiosyncrasies cannot be elaborated into a character that is truly tragic. We must in the nature of things fail to be touched by the fate of one whose nature we do not feel to be germane to our own — a fact in which lies the justification of Aristotle's statement that poetry is more philosophical and of more serious import than history; "for poetry," he says, "tends to express the universal, history the particular."

Finally, it is interesting to note that in Richard III we have a Shakespearian character that is little analysed, one as direct and unwavering, as completely under the sway of one dominant passion, as are the characters of Aeschylus and Sophocles.

We come now to the view, which one so often meets, that we can in no true sense speak of characterization in Greek tragedy, because the persons in a Greek play are not free agents: they are so many puppets in the hands of fate. This view, now in a modified, now in an extreme form, is constantly reasserted; but while the element of truth contained in it is evident to all, the criticism, as ordinarily put, is superficial in the extreme, and scarcely touches the surface of the problem. For it is a simple fact that should be clear to every reader that "Fate" is *not* the mainspring of the action in most Greek tragedies.

As in discussing the type theory I began with a quotation from Stapfer, who may be called one of its chiefest exponents, so in this case I take DeQuincey. In his essay on Shakespeare he writes: "The purpose and the intention of the Grecian stage was not primarily to develop human *character*, whether in men or women: human *fates* were its object; great tragic situations under the mighty control of a vast cloudy destiny, dimly descried at intervals, and brooding over human life by mysterious agencies, and for mysterious ends.

Man, no longer the representative of an august *will*, man the passion-puppet of fate, could not with any effect display what we call character, which is a distinction between man and man, emanating originally from the will, and expressing its determinations, moving under the large variety of human impulses. The will is the central point of character; and this was obliterated, thwarted, cancelled by the dark fatalism which brooded over the Grecian stage. That explanation will sufficiently clear up the reason why marked or complex variety of character was slighted by the great principles of Greek tragedy." Again in the essay on *The Theory of Greek Tragedy*, after protesting that fate was not an element inherently necessary, he continues: "A prophetic colouring, a colouring of ancient destiny, connected with a character or an event, has the effect of exalting or ennobling. But whatever tends toward this result inevitably translates the persons and their situation from the condition of ordinary breathing life which it was the constant effort of the Greek tragedy to escape; and therefore it was that the Greek poet preferred the gloomy idea of Fate, . . . not because it was necessary, but because it was elevating."

Now there is not among our extant Greek tragedies a single one which may rightly be called a *Schicksalstragödie*, and in many of them fate plays no part. To this statement the *Oedipus* itself is no exception. Even in that play nothing that happens comes to pass merely because it was ordained that it should. Put another than the Sophoclean Oedipus in his place, and the terrible events in the story, humanly speaking, simply would not have happened. Here, as everywhere, the saying of the great thinker holds good, ἦθος ἀνθρώπου δαίμων, *character is destiny*. No poet, no religious thinker is more insistent than Aeschylus in asserting the moral responsibility of man; and moral responsibility is meaningless, unless man is free. Aeschylus has more to say about fate than have his successors, and his Eteocles, when the climax of the tragedy comes, rushes from the stage with words upon his lips which are like nothing so much as the cry of a lost soul; and yet, though he speaks the language

of his day, and uses Fate as a dark, shadowy background against which are seen gods and men alike, Aeschylus was himself no fatalist, and his Nemesis, *the Apportioner*, is not Fate. His meditations on human life and on the great events in which he had himself taken so conspicuous a part, had given him a sense of the inevitableness of things. This, and with it a sense of the self-perpetuating power of evil, stood out before his mind as among the cardinal facts of human experience. Man lives his life, works his work, expresses his personality, in conflict with inexorable circumstance, whether within or without himself. Now, if in asserting these facts and illustrating these lessons, Aeschylus speaks of Fate, or imagines a Curse brooding over a house, and, as it were, entailing a heritage of sin upon each generation, this should not lessen our realization of the fact that the individual after all achieves his own doom. It is his own *ὑβρις* that brings *νέμεσις* down upon his head.

And how is it with us today? Are we without a sense of the inexorableness of circumstance, of the inevitableness of things? Do we not hold that environment may warp and stunt the development of the higher sides of a nature as surely as though the individual in question were "ordained" to doom? And does not the common view of heredity make of it an external and compelling force in men's lives? Nay more: it may safely be asserted that there can be no real tragedy, expressed in terms of drama, that does not take account of external as well as internal compulsion. Othello, Lear, Macbeth, aye, and Hamlet, too, fall as truly through striving in vain against the laws that govern the world, as do Agamemnon, Oedipus, Antigone.

Another view may be noticed which, though it is not so significant or so prevalent as those already mentioned, has of recent years come to play its part, and to my mind a pernicious part, in the interpretation of Greek tragedy. I have reference to the attempt to apply the results of anthropological studies to the analysis of tragic characters. This may be seen in von Wilamowitz; it may be seen for English readers in Gilbert Murray's monograph on *Hamlet and Ores-*

tes; and yet we ask ourselves how from this source light is to be thrown upon the interpretation of characters which are, after all, creations of the poet. We obtain from these studies a mass of crude elements, drawn from the most diverse sources and combined by methods in which, at times, cleverness seems to triumph over sane judgment; and then from these crude elements conclusions of the most far-reaching importance are drawn, in the light of which we are to shape our apprehension of the poet's meaning and our conception of his methods as a creative artist. Without seeking in the least to detract from the value of the facts brought to light by these investigations, or denying that we may by this means learn something of the rise and first crude beginnings of the art-form which was later on to afford a vehicle of expression for the tragic poet, we may rightly insist upon the importance of remembering that the true significance of an art is not to be seen in the period of its first crude beginnings, but in the period when it has attained its full power of expression.

Finally, a word regarding the view that in Greek tragedy there is absolutely no progressive development of character. To discuss this view at length would require the analytical study of certain concrete characters, Medea, for example, or Iphigenia, which space will not permit. It is plain that some of the matters already mentioned, the brevity of the play, the simplicity of the action, the intense concentration, would here, too, act as limiting conditions; but it is to speak without recognition of the facts to say of the antique artist, as Brander Matthews does (*Development of the Drama*, 70): "All his characters are and must be unchanging. Prometheus and Medea are the same at the end of the play as they were at the beginning." The former of the two plays here alluded to may well seem a tragedy in which there is a minimum alike of action and of characterization; but to see no change, no progression, from the Prometheus who longs for death as a release from his torments to the Prometheus who glories in his immortality, since it assures him that he will live to see the downfall of his foe, is to fail to understand

the play. And if one studies Medea at all closely, one sees that she has at the opening of the play no clear thought of the exquisite vengeance which she ultimately inflicts upon the faithless Jason. Her plan is evolved in the course of the play, and it is not until after the much-misunderstood Aegeus scene that her resolve is finally taken.

These may perhaps be said to be but slight touches, but they should serve at least to warn us against the danger of hasty and sweeping generalizations, and to lead us, as was suggested at the opening of this paper, to study first of all the facts actually offered by the plays themselves. We shall find simplicity everywhere, everywhere limiting conditions or conventions; we shall find speech often, where today we should look for action; in the portrayal of character we shall find but little introspection, little psychology; but we shall find that the stress is everywhere laid upon traits that are fundamental and true and normal, that the petty, the mean, the morbid had for the artist no charms; and we shall find, too, that the psychology that is offered us is, as Gilbert Murray has well said, "not the psychology of melodrama, specially contrived so as to lead to 'situations.' It is that of real human nature imaginatively observed or profoundly felt" (*English Literature and the Classics*, 20).

In thus seeking rightly to apprehend the art of characterization as seen in Greek tragedy, one is fully conscious of the wealth of new and unimagined beauty that was to be disclosed in the drama of a later day. In this study we have been dealing with the early age of a rich and subtle art. But it was an age in which the imagination was quick to respond to the demands which the artist made upon it; and to this generosity the artist on his part made a rich return. Beauty he gave, and truth; and he gave them with a bountifulness out of all proportion to the simple elements upon which his art was based.